

Re-Imagining Traditions: Comparison of John Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui

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Abstract:

This research is intended to focus on theories and beliefs of Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui, as they appear in their writings, paintings, and other scholars' studies on them and to compare these two figures in the historical context of art education. From this comparison, several significant similarities, which could be helpful for today's art education, will be drawn.

1. Introduction

As Tate Britain, its new name, the Tate Gallery in London recently presented *Ruskin, Turner, and the Pre-Raphaelites* as the first exhibition after reopening the gallery. Showing John Ruskin's (1819-1900) own works as well as paintings by Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, this exhibit provided the audience with an opportunity to revisit the influential writer and artist of nineteenth-century England. Even though he was respected as one of the most influential art critics about one century ago, many scholars have pronounced his ideas irrelevant for our modern society. His ideas and theories are considered even out-dated nowadays. However, Ruskin is "always there, in other words, and always returning" as shown by the fact that the gallery selected him as a main theme for its meaningful reopening exhibition (Hickey, 2000, p.132).

On the other hand, Kim Chong-hui (1786-1856), who was a highly regarded scholar and painter in nineteenth-century Korea, started to be reevaluated by a Japanese

scholar, Fujitsuka Rin, who wrote about him in his doctoral dissertation in 1935. It was sensational because Korean artists and scholars were undervalued during the Japanese colonial period. However, after the liberation, many scholars studied Kim Chong-hui, and, fortunately, the public appreciation of his scholarship and art was gradually renewed.

When encountering Ruskin's thoughts, ideas, as well as his life in class, I was reminded of Kim Chong-hui of my home country, Korea. The public's view on both scholars varied and even became whimsical. Sometimes, they were highly respected, but at other times they were not. Like Ruskin, Kim Chong-hui excelled in both writing and painting. Also, Kim Chong-hui influenced the whole culture, as well as art, and he led a cultural movement with many followers, like Ruskin, who had much impact on the fields of art, architecture, social reform, and so on in the Victorian age. Most importantly, both figures strongly contributed to the art education of their age with their big passion for art.

This research paper is intended to focus on theories and beliefs of Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui, as they appear in their writings, paintings, and other scholars' studies on them and to compare these two figures in the historical context of art education. From the comparison, I will draw several similarities that could be helpful for today's art education. Multiculturalism and cross-culturalism are significant aspects of historical studies today. The world in which we live is no longer divided into the *East* and the *West*. The two cultures cross over and influence each other, and this cultural interaction is one of the most crucial issues in current art education. In this regard, I believe that this study of two main figures from the two cultures can help the art education field to get a deeper understanding of the crossover between Eastern art and Western art.

2. Literature Review

Multicultural Art Education

Smith (1980) states that our society no longer has unifying values and group heroes as it had in the past. In her view, one reason for this change is a new *pluralism*. This is “pluralism in values, life styles, and goals, which has been reflected in fine art and education” (p.351). Her viewpoint is closely related to today’s multicultural art education. Our world is global, so today’s art educators accordingly should be prepared to understand cross-cultural values. Nowadays we often see positive outcomes resulting from the crossover between different cultures.

Especially in the United States, multicultural education became significant due to its cultural diversity. As the population of this country changes, and higher numbers of culturally different groups are enrolled in its public schools, “multicultural education is becoming increasingly more important” (Young, 1990, p.33).

Among the attempts to compare Eastern culture with Western culture and apply the findings to current art education was Japan Trail '83. Dobbs (1983) put emphasis on the importance of exchange and understanding between the United States and Asia in this global era. He also presents significant characteristics of Japanese art, which can have a positive good influence on American art education; “the intensive attention to detail and the importance of such values as harmony and integrity reinforced the sense of powerful aesthetic conditioning” (p.11).

Also, Pariser (1992-1993) compared early childhood drawings of Wang Yani of China with those of Toulouse-Lautrec. Discovering many similarities between the two artists, his study shed new light on today's multicultural education.

With this in mind, I will look at the scholarship and art of John Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui by examining other scholars' studies in the next section.

The Scholarship and Art of John Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui

Hickey (2000) states that “no one, before or since, has taken visual art more seriously or written about it with more passion and eloquence than John Ruskin” (p.129). Nineteenth-century England witnessed the emergence of industrial society with the pervasion of materialism. With this social background, Ruskin viewed art as the means of striking “a balance between material and spiritual progress” (Efland, 1990, p.133). Therefore, for Ruskin, art was not a tool for entertainment but for the appreciation of one's morality, which “gives expression to the creating spirit of the universe” (Efland, 1990, p.135). He also made a connection between art and religion. Through his several books such as *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, and *The Stones of Venice*, he offered “Victorian audiences informative and morally edifying” lessons, which were appropriate for the Britain of his age (Efland, 1990, p.134).

Efland (1990) describes that, even though Ruskin's thoughts are not difficult for the general public to understand, they have been hard to be covered due to the vastness of his writings. Ruskin thought of art as the imitation of nature and thought that artists should be devoted to represent the most noble of subjects. Therefore, in his view, morality, nobleness, and spirituality were very important in art.

According to Beckley (1996), Ruskin was “a pedagogue who passionately expressed his viewpoints in a gentle poetic manner” when he was teaching (p.42). As an art educator, he taught the collusion of art, morality, and religion. His pedagogy strongly influenced descendants, so most art schools currently provide a mixture of philosophy, religion, literature, ethics, and the study of techniques. Beckley reports that Hobson (1899), in *John Ruskin, Social Reformer*, described Ruskin as “the greatest social teacher of his age” (Beckley, p.247). This shows Ruskin’s strong interest in society as well as art and his endeavor to find out the role of art in industrial society.

Furthermore, Stankiewicz (1984) points out that this scholar focused on “the value of art as a tool for the education of morals; close ties between art, nature, and spiritual experience; the importance of art as a cultural study; and the role of imagination and genius in art” (p.51).

On the other hand, Kim Chong-hui was a renowned scholar and artist of nineteenth-century Korea, the latter Chosun period (1700-1850). In the words of Choe Wan-su (1986, November), Kim Chong-hui was called an infant prodigy when he was very young. At the age of six, he wrote an album of writings on the advent of spring, and this was highly admired by artists and scholars of the Chosun era. Choe explains that the artist’s study in Beijing and under the teachings of Pak Che-ga strongly influenced him and became the roots of his artistic development. Also, Choe views Kim Chong-hui as a pioneer in the corrupted society of the Chosun period in that he led the social movement, *Practical Learning (Shilhak)*, established his own unique calligraphy style called *Chusache*, contributed to the development of Korean epigraphy, and tried to reform fine arts.

Choe Sun-taek (1996) mentions that Kim Chong-hui's creation of the innovative and unique calligraphy style was a very significant moment in the art history of the Chosun era, and he influenced a number of his descendents in Korea. This achievement seemed possible by his genuine and incessant concentration on his artistic and theoretical works even though he was much influenced by Chinese scholars and painters. Moreover, throughout his life, he tried to show the concept of "the union of scholarship and art" (p.15). Choe also points out that the current studies focusing on his calligraphy works are not sufficient compared to the significance of his works in Korean art history.

According to Pak (1999), Kim Chong-hui accomplished cultural and spiritual independence from China by creating *Chusache* as Chung Sun created his unique *Jingyoung-sansu* style. Also, his orchid paintings, depicting the flower as a symbol of *the noble (gunja)*, contributed to the pervasion of this kind of Sagunja style and Mooninhwa style paintings in this period of Chosun. This painting style was originally influenced by the Chinese Southern School style, and Pak explains that it flourished together with the Practical Learning (Shilhak) movement.

3. Historical Research: The Similarities between John Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui

Even though John Ruskin (Figure1) and Kim Chong-hui (Figure 2) were raised and lived in very different areas and cultures, I found considerable similarities between the two figures through a thorough consultation of historical resources.

First, both John Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui were from the affluent families, which functioned as a good basis for their artistic and intellectual development, especially in their childhood. Ruskin's father, John James Ruskin (1785-1864), owned a

wine-importing firm, and the young Ruskin read Sir Walter Scott, Maria Edgeworth, Lord Byron, as well as children's books. He studied minerals and enjoyed copying book illustrations, which led to his habit of close observation and the development of hand-eye coordination. Also, an illustrated edition of the poem *Italy* (1830), by Samuel Rogers (1763-1855), which he received as a thirteenth-birthday present, introduced him to William Turner's works of art. In comparison, Kim Chong-hui was born into a high-class family. His family was knighted during the reign of Taejong, the third monarch of the Chosun dynasty, and his father, Kim Han-jin, was a royal son-in law. This environment offered Kim Chong-hui easier access to writing, painting, and Chinese scholars' studies in his early childhood. The most significant experience, made possible by his family's status, was Kim Chong-hui's visit to Beijing. He accompanied his father, who was appointed vice minister of Taxation and deputy to the winter solstice envoy to the Qing court, at the age of twenty four. In China, he was taught by an elder in Beijing academic circles, Weng Fang-gang (1733-1818), who was well versed in epigraphy. Many eminent Chinese scholars emerged under his tutorship. This respected scholar's teaching strongly influenced young Kim Chong-hui.

Second, both figures excelled in both writing and painting and had sharp insights into almost all the fields as well as art. Ruskin created his own drawings and paintings, (See figure 3, 4, and 5). As an art critic, he ardently advocated Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites and published many books including *Modern Painters*. Hickey (2000) explains that Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites shared the passion for veracity that was seen in Ruskin's fragmentary drawings, "which were bereft of any ideology beyond the passion." He wrote in a literary style, which has been admired by many writers till now.

Kim Chong-hui also was eminent in painting, calligraphy, writing, as well as theoretical studies. As a painter he created many orchid paintings and some landscapes in the Mooninwha style (See Figure 6 and 7). Among them, *A Cottage under Evergreen Trees* (*Sehando*) has been praised as one of the excellent paintings of the Chosun era (See Figure 8). He sought a literary style in painting. For him, “it was the primary aim to attain harmony between the spirit of books and the fragrance of letters” (Choe, 1986, November). Ahn (1995) describes that the variations of ink tones and brush strokes suggest the painter’s integrity as an upright scholar. Most significantly, Kim Chong-hui established his unique calligraphy style, *Chusache* (See Figure 9).

Third, both figures were sincerely devoted to art education; one worked in institutions and the other as a private tutor. Ruskin taught at the Working Men’s College for five years (1855-1860) and then served his professorship at Oxford, where his lectures were very popular. He published three manuals: *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), *The Elements of Perspective* (1859), and *The Laws of Fesole* (1877-79). Beckley points out that Ruskin’s way of teaching was to speak the Truth. In Efland’s view, Ruskin’s philosophy of art education was derived from his views about society and the moral nature of art. He focused on two aspects, *perception* and *invention*, and insisted that only perception could be taught. He also believed that “through the teaching of art one could teach everything” (Efland, 1990, p.136). In comparison, Kim Chong-hui was the center of a new force in the Chosun period. Because painting skills were tutored by masters in this period, he offered tutorship to young scholars who sought a fresh and realistic learning. Among his pupils were such well-known artists as Shin Kwan-ho, Yi Ha-ung, and Yi Sang-jok.

Fourth, both figures focused on the appreciation of morality and spirituality through art. For Ruskin, “art was a source of spiritual insight and morality and thus important in human progress” (Efland, 1990, p.135). For him, it was the purpose of art to give expression to the creating spirit of the universe. Kim Chong-hui believed that a higher realm of spirituality could be attained through painting and writing, as other scholars in the Chosun period thought. Actually, he has been regarded as a scholar and politician who had a generous and considerate personality and he has been respected by many descendents as a good model artist of high spirituality.

Fifth, both figures were very interested in the past and applied the study of the past to their own creation. Ruskin advocated the Gothic style and wanted to see the restoration of social life based on the early ideals of the medieval community. From his perspective, “Gothic art was moral art because it was based on natural facts, simultaneously serviceable, memorable, and beautiful because it reflected the creator [God]” (Efland, 1990, p.135). Kim Chong-hui was devoted to the study of epigraphy and ancient oriental books. He thought that we could establish our own culture by studying and researching the past. Scholars assume that his enthusiasm for epigraphy enabled the creation of *Chusache*.

Lastly, both figures had great interest in social reform. Both England and Korea faced a confusing and unstable social situation at that time. In these circumstances, the two did not consider art independent from society. They believed that through art human beings could create a more human society. Ruskin strongly opposed industrial society and materialism. He tried to help the public realize the importance of art through his teaching and publishing. His art criticism was social criticism at the same time. Kim

Chong-hui passed the Civil Service Examination and served as a politician. He was one of the main leaders of the Practical Learning movement, which flourished in Korean academic circles in this period. He believed that through this movement, which focused on self-reflection and self-criticism, people could become more equal. This is why he accepted children from the middle class as his pupils as well and insisted that people besides high-class people (*Yangban*) should be eligible for the Civil Service Examination.

4. Conclusion

In sum, I pointed out six characteristics that can be found in the lives and thoughts of both Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui: family background as a base for the development as an artist and a scholar; excellence at both painting and writing; contribution to art education; focus on spirituality and morality in art; interest in the past; and social reform activity.

Unfortunately, Ruskin's theories are not dominant currently as they were in his age. Also, the new society Kim Chong-hui dreamed of never came true as Korea was occupied by Japan. However, as we can see in the recent exhibitions on Ruskin at Yale Center for British Art, New Heaven (Jan. 20-Feb. 27, 2000), at the Grolier Club, New York in collaboration with Harvard University (Feb. 16-Apr. 29, 2000), and at the Morgan Library (Sep. 28-Jan. 7, 2001), Ruskin's influence can still be felt. The reputation of Kim Chong-hui is currently growing in other Asian countries as well as in Korea. The people newly discovered his excellent scholarship and high spirituality fostered by art.

With this in mind, I believe that the art and scholarship of the two artists could shed new light into current art education, which lacks spirituality in this information age. I also think that the comparison of Ruskin and Kim Chong-hui could bridge Eastern culture and Western culture and suggest new solutions to problems that our art education faces in this multicultural era.

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